

University of Waterloo

Faculty of Engineering

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An Exchange to Lyon, France

GENE 303 – Option in International Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking to many people before going on exchange, I was told that it would be the best experience of my university career. Although the task of deciphering foreign course descriptions, filling out paperwork, finding a flight and place to live, and leaving Canada can seem daunting at first, I can attest that the experience is worth it and the decision to go on exchange really is the best one you can make during your university years.

On an exchange to any country, you will not only meet the locals, but will also form friendships with students from all over the world. It is an enriching experience in which you gain an appreciation for the differences, but even more so for the similarities, between people of our generation whether they come from Canada, Brazil, Estonia, or Singapore.

Read on to get a flavour of the lifestyle of an exchange student in Lyon, but use this guide only as a starting point. Talk to current exchange students from the university you want to attend and former Waterloo exchange students like myself to get all the details before you make your decision to go. But *do* go. You won't regret it.

LYON, FRANCE

The City

Classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Lyon is a city of one million people located in the Rhône-Alps region of France. Its size and central location, only two hours from Paris, the French Alps, and Switzerland, make it ideally situated for travelers and those looking to experience the French lifestyle.

Founded by the Romans in 43AD as Lugdunum and serving as the capital of Gaul under the Roman Empire, the city grew rapidly thanks to its location on the banks of the Rhône and Saône rivers and its function as a gateway to Rome. Lyon was renowned in the 17th and 18th centuries for its silk industry, in the 20th century as a major site of the French resistance to the German occupation of WWII, and today as a tourist destination boasting Roman ruins, 15th century architecture, famous gastronomic delights, and the cultural and social attractions of a major European city.

The University

I studied at INSA Lyon, l'Institut National des Sciences Appliquées, an engineering school with campuses in several French cities. The university is located in the modern, concrete-gray suburb of Villeurbanne, a 20 minute tram and subway ride or 45 minute walk to downtown Lyon. If you thought that the 1950s style architecture of Waterloo left something to be desired, you will be sorely disappointed with the INSA campus. It is by far the ugliest that I have had the misfortune of laying eyes on. But do not despair, it's easy to get into the beautiful city to forget the dreariness of the campus.

Getting There

Reasonably priced flights to Paris from Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa are not difficult to find. It is possible to continue on a connecting flight to the Lyon-St Exupéry airport or to take the TGV (train) directly from the Charles de Gaulle airport to Lyon. The 2 hour train to Lyon costs about 55 € normally, but the investment in a 50% off student train pass pays off quickly.

Discovering Lyon

Thanks to the hundreds of exchange students in Lyon each year at the various universities, there are many free cultural activities available. I went on a tour of the old city with an architecture professor who explained the clues that reveal the development of the city from Fourvière Hill to the banks of the Saône and beyond. Another free tour taught of the history of the city, exploring everything from the traboules which hid French resistance fighters during WWII to the district of the silk weavers (canuts) in Croix-Rousse. One program paired exchange students with French families to have a home cooked French meal and learn about each other's culture. There was also a mentoring program matching students with local industry leaders to make cultural and business connections and promote the region. Participating in these programs added unforgettable experiences such as home cooked dinners and good conversation with a French family, authentic meals at local restaurants, a trip to a family vineyard in the Beaujolais region, a wine tasting lesson with an enologist, a reception with the mayor in the spectacular city hall, and visits to an electrical engineering company and a refinery.

As a starting point to learn about Lyon, I recommend the following website:

<http://www.lyon-france.com/pages/en/>

LIVING IN FRANCE

Language

Do you speak French? You will by the end of your exchange. If you attended public school in Canada then you're already on your way to getting by in the country. You may think you've forgotten everything since grade 9, but don't worry, it's still buried in your head somewhere. Even if you have never learned French, you won't be alone; many exchange students came with absolutely no knowledge of the language. Waterloo usually requires grade 13 French plus one university level course to be considered proficient enough to go on exchange, but this requirement can be waived if you attend the intensive French course described below.

While French students don't speak English as well as many other Europeans (Finns and Germans come to mind from experience), the international language between exchange students is usually English. This means that you won't be practicing your French very much when hanging out with your friends from Germany, Australia, Italy, Spain, Finland, Norway, Belgium, etc. More than likely, they'll all be practicing their English with you.

Intensive French Course

No matter what your level of French, I would highly recommend going to the one-month intensive French course in August. Students are divided based on ability and spend 5 hours a day for 4 weeks studying French in 20-25 person classes. I was in the most advanced class, where many of the people were fluent in French, but we weren't bored. We reviewed a bit of grammar, but spent most of our time working on expression, comprehension, and writing. Our course materials involved current TV and radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and cultural discussions. After 100 hours of class, I'd not only improved my ability with the language, but had also learned a great deal about France and felt much more prepared to live there for the next 5 months.

I would recommend the French course even for someone who is fluent in French because it also acts as a one-month frosh week. From mid-August to mid-September, there are no French students on campus. The only people there are the 200 or so exchange students enrolled in the course, all living together in the same residence. This is the big social bonding time of the year. Everyone is new and looking to make friends. Weekend trips are organized and subsidized by the university. In my year we spent a weekend up in the Alps at La Plagne, a weekend at a resort in Ramatuelle on the Cote d'Azur, and a day in Annecy. 50 € covered the transportation, 2 nights of accommodation, food, and activities for an entire weekend. Besides the weekend trips and 5 hours of class per day, there is all the socializing in between. You'll make field trips to discover the city and museums, go out to the campus and downtown bars and clubs, discover the joy of 2 € bottles of wine, and make close friendships with the rest of the exchange students that will last the remainder of your exchange if not the remainder of your life.

Residence

You will be offered a place in residence. The rooms vary greatly, from small, decrepit double rooms with shared hallway bathrooms and no kitchen facilities (although renovation has been promised for several years), to clean, spacious, single suites with a small kitchen and private bathroom. A meal plan is mandatory for weekdays and optional for weekends.

You should also consider finding a place to live in the city. This is the choice I made and it definitely has its advantages. Living in residence on a university campus in the suburbs is fun. You're in the middle of the social scene, always up to date on parties and outings, and you can roll out of bed and be in class a few minutes later. But you're missing out on the experience of actually *living* in France. Having a flat in the city centre is much more like actually experiencing life in France. Most flats are in the upper 3 or 4 stories overlooking a street full of shops – boulangeries, pâtisseries, and cafés. Living in the city centre puts you more in touch with day to day French life. For example, I would pick up a fresh baguette on the way home from school, shop at the huge farmer's market which took over the main street in my neighbourhood every weekend, and go for walks through neighbourhoods that felt a hundred times more European than the best Hollywood movie interpretation.

It's a trade off between social, student life and the full French experience, but it's one you should consider.

LEISURE

Sports

The university has a good selection of sports available. There are many tennis courts and a few soccer fields. There is no good fitness centre, and memberships at private clubs are expensive. I can't comment very well on the activities available on campus, as I satisfied my desire for sports with skiing.

Lyon is 2 to 2.5 hours from the big ski resorts in the French Alps. There is a ski club which organizes daytrips for about 20-25 € including lift ticket and transportation. They even rent skis (nothing fancy, but at very good prices). The skiing is like nothing you've ever experienced in Eastern Canada. I spent almost every Saturday from mid-November to mid-January skiing in the Alps at Alpe d'Huez, Val Thorens, Les 2 Alpes, and many more resorts (see www.skifrance.fr for more info). Paris might have more museums and culture than you can experience in a lifetime, but Lyon has it beat as a place to live if you're a ski bum.

Nightlife

Lyon is a big city and therefore has a good selection of bars and clubs. You will also find an opera, symphony, several theatres, movies (look for v.o., version original, for non-dubbed English movies), and cafés. There is one on campus bar, K-Fêt, and one bar right beside the campus, Oxxo, but be prepared to travel into the city if you want some variety.

TRAVEL

If you are going to be spending half a year or more in Europe, you should get out and see as much as possible. Lyon is centrally located to much of Western Europe, so there is no excuse not to get out and explore!

Located on the Paris-to-Marseilles TGV (fast train) line, Lyon is only 2 hours and 55 € round trip (with a student train card) from Paris. 50% train prices are available for all destinations in France when you buy the student train card for about 50 €. Switzerland is only 2 hours away, and you can also make it to Italy, Spain, Germany, Belgium, and England with some overnight train travel or a few days off school.

Be sure to check out RyanAir for cheap flights to London and connections all over Europe.

ACADEMIC STUDIES

The academic system at INSA is divided into two parts, a common first 2 years and a specialized final 3 years. This means that if you are studying electrical engineering, for example, you will be taking courses in any or all of 3rd, 4th, and 5th years. The class schedule is not fixed. Lectures, tutorials, and labs are scheduled for different times each week, but the calendar is posted at the beginning of the term allowing you to plan your time accordingly.

Lectures are quite similar to what we are used to at Waterloo, aside from the obvious fact that the language is French. The language difference also means that it might take some time to get used to notation differences in your engineering courses. Professors teach the tutorials, making them generally more useful than those at Waterloo. There are no textbooks for the courses. Instead, profs distribute course notes (free) and often recommend a few textbooks for extra study. Fortunately, the library has a good variety of texts, and I was able to borrow English textbooks for 3 of my courses (2 of which were the same texts that my classmates were using back home for the equivalent course).

Evaluation

Passing the term is usually one of the biggest worries of incoming exchange students. Rumors abound that the department is very lenient on exchange students and that usually profs will give a second chance to those that fail the exam the first time around. Of course, this is still up to the prof's discretion and the idea of testing the leniency of a prof is not very appealing in the days before a final.

Final exams count for 100% in many courses. Some have midterms, but not all. There are labs associated with some courses, but they are listed as separate components and are not required for a course credit. Waterloo only requires students to complete the theoretical material, so you are free to sign up for a lab if you want but it is not necessary.

Exams are marked out of 20. A mark of 7 is considered a pass for a course, but a French student must obtain an average of 10 overall to continue to the next semester. Exchange students only need to obtain a 7 in each course to earn a credit. Since the marks are generally lower than at Waterloo, exchange students receive only a CR/NCR (pass/fail) on their Waterloo transcripts, rather than having Waterloo try to convert a French mark to an equivalent percentage. This means that whether you get a 7/20 or 20/20 on your INSA course, you will receive the same CR designation on your Waterloo transcript. It is important to remember that graduate schools may require your French transcript, so having a bunch of 7s is not the best idea.

So how lenient are profs for failed exams? Luckily for me, I didn't have to test this theory, but I do know that several exchange students failed exams and either talked the professor into bumping their mark up to a pass if they were very close, or were allowed to write a makeup exam. This is entirely up to the discretion of the prof, so being a good student and attending classes will go a long way in working out problems should you have them.

My advice for those worried about the academic side of doing an exchange is "don't be." You aren't going on exchange to study engineering. If all you want to do is learn the technical material as best as possible, stay at Waterloo. You should be going on exchange for the cultural, language, adventure, and mind-broadening experiences that you will encounter. Don't worry about the courses. You'll learn enough of your core engineering program and will gain so much more than your classmates that you'll be better off for it forever.

CONCLUSIONS

An exchange is a fantastic experience, probably the best you can have in your university career. Don't let the pre-departure work overwhelm you. Your university days are possibly the only chance to have an experience like this. Living and studying with other exchange students is a cultural experience that blows away any boxed tour from your local travel agent.

What are you waiting for? Allez-y!